

## ANOTHER REFERENCE: ROME

### A COMMENT ON NANCY'S DECONSTRUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY AND HIS THESIS ON THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF CIVIL RELIGION

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“The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.”<sup>1</sup>

“L'identité chrétienne est donc d'entrée de jeu une constitution par autodépassement: [...] la *civitas* dans la *civitas Dei*, etc.”<sup>2</sup>

In the ‘Ouverture’ to his work, *La décloison*, Nancy warns us not to be too confident that the Enlightenment and secularization has done away with religion. Reason itself has been weakened by reducing itself to rationality. What we need is a “piété de la raison” – reason in the sense of Hegel’s *Vernunft*. To prevent politics from being conquered again by a resurrection of religious fervor, we have to develop a new politics that does justice to reason. Political order lacks a final meaning and foundation. Rousseau pointed to this defect when he suggested the need for a *civil religion*. Even democracy seems to be in need of something that politics itself cannot provide, which animates the passion of being together. The alternative is between a “hyperfascisme” (in which democratic politics reshapes itself by using a new variety of religion) and a reinvention of what “laïcisme” means.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Everyman’s Library, New York/London/Toronto 1993, Chapter II, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, ‘La déconstruction du christianisme’, p. 212. The text dates from 1995 and was published earlier in *Études philosophiques* (no.4, 1998); now it reappears in *La Décloison (Déconstruction du christianisme, I)*, Galilée, Paris 2005.

<sup>3</sup> O.c., p. 14.

The aim of this paper is to show that this opposition of extremes emerges from a particular view on the ‘theopolitical’ history of the west, in which Christianity plays a decisive role. Especially Nancy’s view on the problem of ‘civil religion’ is determined by a ‘Christian’ view on religion. For Nancy, Christianity seems to represent a threefold political event. Firstly, it spiritualizes political order. Secondly, it liberates politics from religion (and religion from politics) by making the first a completely human affair and the second an affair of God. Thirdly, it delegitimizes any community based on political power. Man-made order is imperfect by definition. Community becomes transcendent. As Christians would say, it will only be attained in God’s Kingdom. Not only is Christianity “la religion de la sortie de la religion”<sup>4</sup>, it is a spiritual movement that makes *civil* religion suspect. Christianity contains the roots of a fundamental *resistance* to ‘political theology’.<sup>5</sup> In this line of thought, Nancy seems to reject all forms of state cult, that is any fusion of the autonomy of politics and the heteronomy of religion, even all secular varieties praising the state in the name of communitarian principles such as fraternity, justice and so on. With his rejection of, or at least resistance to, civil religion from a Christian point of view, Nancy takes sides in a well-known debate, which started with Erik Peterson’s theological denunciation of political theology, a critique of Carl Schmitt, to which the latter responded more than thirty years later.<sup>6</sup> This controversy shows that it is possible to reframe Nancy’s thesis by saying that *a certain interpretation* of Christianity, itself a particular worldview, makes resistance to civil religion inevitable. There is no proof in Nancy’s text of other possible points of view than a Christian one, and no other interpretations of Christianity. In fact, the whole debate on civil religion refers to a clash of different conceptions of political order and human society (being together), also *within* the Christian world. Deconstructing Christianity should therefore also take into consideration the inner tensions within Christianity and the tensions with other worldviews that produced Christianity in the first place. So, there

<sup>4</sup> Nancy depends heavily on Marcel Gauchet’s thesis of Christianity as the religion for departing from religion, “la religion de la sortie de la religion”, in *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Gallimard, Paris 1985, p. 133.

<sup>5</sup> This is the thesis of Nancy in a recent text: ‘Church, State, Resistance’, in Hent de Vries, and Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies. Public Religion in a Post-Secular World*, Fordham University Press, New York 2006, pp. 102-112.

<sup>6</sup> Erik Peterson, *Der Monotheismus als politisches Problem: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der politischen Theologie im Imperium Romanum*, Hegner, Leipzig 1935; Carl Schmitt, *Politische Theologie II. Die Legende von der Erledigung jeder Politischen Theologie*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1970.

is enough reason to dig a little deeper into this question and examine the confrontation between a 'Roman' point of view (favouring civil religion) and a 'Christian' point of view (rejecting civil religion). There is hardly any better example of this confrontation than Augustine's criticism, mainly in chapters 4 and 6 of his *De Civitate Dei*, of the Roman political theology, as explained by Terentius Varro. By revisiting this ancient confrontation, I hope to shed some light on the premises of Nancy's thesis.

## 1. Deconstruction of Christianity

In the opening paragraphs of his paper, 'La deconstruction du christianisme'<sup>7</sup>, one gets the impression that Nancy is referring to a particular *community*, people who share some basic ideas about the world, society and human life. Is it the community of secularized, modern people, the majority of those living in some of the main countries of 'old Europe'? Nancy addresses his words only to these people, confronting them with a question concerning their intellectual roots. Are they sure that their thoughts are post-Christian? This impression puzzles me. Who or what is "we" and "our tradition" introduced in these opening sections? Nancy appears to be addressing his text to a much smaller audience than 'the secularized world'. He is talking to philosophers or, even more specifically, to phenomenological philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger and Derrida (with a view on Nietzsche<sup>8</sup>). Nancy also seems to be talking from a position in which 'laicism' is a matter of course. In this particular context, the reference to Athens and Jerusalem, "le 'juif-grec'" (Derrida), is predominant. According to Nancy, these philosophers hardly appreciate what they owe to Christianity, while at the same time fully recognizing their commitment to the Jewish and ancient Greek traditions of thought.<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche knew this well. Nancy tries to take up this line of thought without losing sight of the fact that in our world Christianity itself has dissolved.<sup>10</sup> Christianity no longer

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<sup>7</sup> On p. 203, o.c., we read: "Ma question sera très simple, naïve même comme il convient peut-être au départ d'une démarche phénoménologique: en quoi et jusqu'à quel point *tenons-nous* au christianisme? comment exactement sommes-nous, dans toute notre tradition, *tenus* par lui?" (Italics by Nancy).

<sup>8</sup> Nancy refers to Nietzsche's *Der Antichrist*, section 8 ("Alles, was Theologen-Blut im Leibe hat – unsre ganze Philosophie").

<sup>9</sup> O.c., p. 204: "on pourrait se demander si le »juif-grec« ... n'est pas le chrétien."

<sup>10</sup> As a confession of faith, which he strangely enough calls "précepts", Nancy states that Christianity can only be recognized as a tradition that has dissolved (itself), but that atheism cannot be understood without its Christian roots. See o.c., pp. 204-205. So, his question is what this ambivalent bond to Christianity (being a Christian without being a Christian) means.

is the centre of our worldview, what Nancy calls “l’ordre du sens”. There is no longer any need to attack or to defend Christianity. We have to ask rather whether Christianity is the process in which any “régime de sens” is dissolved. The shadow of Christianity in which we are living is the openness of our culture. So, Christianity should be a third reference for contemporary philosophy.

## 2. Nancy’s references and one that remains marginal

My aim in this paper is to draw attention to yet another reference, which I think is important for our understanding of Western civilization, but which Nancy tends to neglect. I think that it is no surprise that this reference is less philosophical, and more political. This reference is to Rome – the Roman Empire, ancient Roman thought. It is true, for most philosophers, Roman thought is seen as merely a recapturing of the great thinkers of Athens. In the history of *political* philosophy, however, the reference to Rome is inevitable.<sup>11</sup> In the political history of the West, the *translatio imperii*, the continuation of the Roman Empire in new forms, has played an immense role for centuries. There was even a predominant theology of history in which the Roman reference was identical to Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Modern political thought, from Machiavelli to Rousseau at least, is unthinkable without the reference to Rome. The example of the Roman Empire was present in the French Revolution, but also in the attempts of modern states to become ‘sacred’ institutions, attempts which in its most excessive forms ended in Fascism and National Socialism. Carl Schmitt once wrote that there exists an “anti-Roman affect”.<sup>13</sup> This makes clear the sense in which the association of Christianity with “le»juif-grec«” is not only a sign of a polemical stance, but also of the limited context of Nancy’s approach, at least in his ‘La déconstruction du christianisme’. I do not mean to say that his questions are not pertinent. What I want to make clear

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<sup>11</sup> In ‘State, Church, Resistance’, o.c., Nancy acknowledges this impact of ‘Rome’, but mainly in a negative sense.

<sup>12</sup> Endre von Ivánka, *Rhomäerreich und Gottesvolk. Das Glaubens-, Staats- und Volksbewusstsein der Byzantiner und seine Auswirkung auf die ostkrichlich-osteuropäische Geisteshaltung*, Verlag Karl Alber, Freiburg/München 1968 (especially the first part is of a more general character, showing how Rome was relevant for western Christianity as well); Joseph Ratzinger, ‘The Spiritual Roots of Europe: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow’, in Joseph Ratzinger, and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots. The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam*, Basic Books, New York 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form*, Jakob Hegner, Hellaerau 1923, p. 7: “Es gibt einen anti-römischen Affekt. Aus ihm nährt sich jener Kampf gegen Papismus, Jesuitismus und Klerikalismus, der einige Jahrhunderte europäischer Geschichte bewegt, mit einem riesenhaften Aufgebot von religiösen und politischen Energien.”

in this paper is the relevance of the reference to Rome, both in its negative and its positive manifestations. Both manifestations are part of the dispersed identity of the West (or Europe). In my view, Christianity marks not just a hermeneutic revolution (that is what Nancy is talking about), but also a breakthrough in the history of the “theological-political problem”.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, Nancy is well aware of the fact that the Roman Empire is the birth-place of Christianity. He rejects the view (the myth) that Christianity fell from the sky. Christianity is not an ‘auto-construction’, but emerges from a specific background. We should ask why this happened. Christianity negated and integrated three traditions: Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. This negation and integration mark three phases in the *early* history of Christianity. Starting as a Jewish sect, it becomes a quasi-philosophical outlook and finally transforms itself into a political theology of the Roman Empire, with fragmented continuation in later ages. Nancy, as I said, is interested in the hermeneutical process, the re-interpretation of traditions<sup>15</sup>, which can be seen as the essence of Christianity itself. It is orthodoxy in a constant movement of re-interpreting itself.<sup>16</sup> Nancy suggests that deconstruction of Christianity is part of Christianity itself.<sup>17</sup> My aim is to comment on this hermeneutic approach of Christianity, by showing that it is typical of the Christian *anti-Roman* position. It is rooted in a tradition that moved away from (civil) religion as *orthopraxy*<sup>18</sup>, and turned completely to the realm of *orthodoxy* and its counterpart, *heterodoxy*. As a hermeneutical-historical process of re-interpretation, Christianity cannot but dissolve itself because it takes interpretation (or what Nancy calls *sens*) too seriously. Nancy’s programmatic essay shows a paradoxical thesis. On the one hand, it stresses the difference between text and interpretation, beginning and tradition, ‘father’ and ‘son’, in order to install philosophical thought in the resulting void, in which meaning becomes uncertain (infinite). On the other hand, Nancy claims that precisely this philosophical approach is in line with

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<sup>14</sup> Leo Strauss invented this phrase. See Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Politico-Theological Problem*, translation Marcus Brainard, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy, o.c., p. 212: “L’identité chrétienne est donc d’entrée de jeu une constitution par auto-dépassement: la Loi ancienne dans la Loi nouvelle, le *logos* dans le Verbe, la *civitas* dans la *civitas Dei*, etc.”

<sup>16</sup> Nancy, o.c., p. 212: “la foi chrétienne est elle-même l’expérience de son histoire”.

<sup>17</sup> Nancy, o.c., pp. 215-216: “Mon hypothèse est que le geste de déconstruction, en tant que geste qui n’est ni critique ni perpétuateur, et en tant que geste témoignant d’un rapport à l’histoire et à la tradition qu’on ne peut trouver ni chez Husserl, ni chez Hegel, ni chez Kant, n’est précisément possible qu’à l’intérieur du christianisme ...”.

<sup>18</sup> See John Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire*, Aubier Montaigne, Paris 2005, and *Religion et piété à Rome*, Albin Michel, Paris 2001.

the *essence* of Christianity, thereby claiming that his interpretation is the only valid one. Of course, this paradox itself is part of the problem he raises. The openness of Christianity (appearing in theology as *reservatio*), due to the acknowledgement of the distance between man and God, can only lead to a proliferation of interpretations, even of interpretations of what ‘the essence’ of Christianity is. There is no ‘we’ and no ‘our tradition’ at all, except that ‘we all’ play a part in the continuing battle of ideas.

An appeal to Nietzsche, Nancy’s witness, is always precarious. He also contrasted Christianity with ancient morality, as a religion of pity. Christianity revolved the traditional (aristocratic) values of Roman republicanism. It turned *pietas* into pity<sup>19</sup>, the love for the institutions and authorities of one’s country to the love of God and of one’s neighbour.<sup>20</sup> The spiritual revolution of Christianity itself in its struggle with its opponents is part of ‘our tradition’ too, and therefore of western identity. A philosophy identifying itself with Christianity and its inherent deconstruction runs the risk of becoming blind to this inner opposition of the West. To get a better idea of what is at stake in this opposition and in what respect the neglect of it affects Nancy’s project, I will explore in some detail one *exemplum* of the contrast between the two cultures or moralities. In fact, I will examine Augustine’s criticism of *Roman* theology<sup>21</sup> as exemplified by the doctrine of the three kinds of theology by Terentius Varro.

Halfway through the first century BC, Varro wrote a large work in which he reconstructed traditional Roman religion.<sup>22</sup> Varro began this work, because he felt that the Roman citizens had forgotten traditional religion. Therefore, the Roman Empire was in decline. The work he finished (consisting of 41 books), the *Antiquitates Rerum Humanarum et Divinarum*, was welcomed by Caesar. It was used by the political elite to strengthen the role of public religion. It was the beginning of the establishment of an imperial cult, which was one thing the

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<sup>19</sup> This shift is documented in James D. Garrison, *Pietas from Vergil to Dryden*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania 1992.

<sup>20</sup> See also Nancy’s ‘State, Church, Resistance’, o.c., pp. 109-110.

<sup>21</sup> It is often forgotten that theology is an ancient invention (Plato, *Politeia*, 379a), further elaborated mainly by Roman stoic philosophers. Originally, the *theologoi* were the people who wrote plays. Only later did the term become synonymous with *Christian* theology.

<sup>22</sup> The text was reconstructed by B. Cardauns: *M. Terentius Varro. Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum. Teil I: Die Fragmente. Teil II: Kommentar* (Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse. Einzelveröffentlichung), Franz Steiner Verlag, Mainz 1976. For the history and context of the doctrine, see G. Lieberg, ‘Die “theologia triperita” in Forschung und Bezeugung’, in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, 1.4, Tübingen 1973, pp. 63-115.

early Christians opposed.<sup>23</sup> Augustine made use of Varro's work in his criticism of Roman religion. Most of the fragments we still have of Varro's books are gathered from Augustine's *The City of God*. The original manuscripts did not survive.

### 3. The creation of meaning in the city

In the opening paragraph of the sixth book of *The City of God*, Augustine, not without irony as we shall see, quotes Cicero celebrating Varro's *Antiquitates*.

“We were like strangers in our own town, visitors who had lost their way. It was your books that, as it were, brought us back home, so that at last we could recognize who we were, and where we were.”<sup>24</sup>

For more than one reason, this quotation is very instructive. We first recognize a main scheme of a community structured by a reference and even a return to an ideal past.<sup>25</sup> The identity of the Romans, of the Roman Empire, of its citizens and the many nations it contains, is created by reconstructing the ancestral religion, the religion of the founding fathers of Rome. This religion has proven successful. After the period of civil war in Rome in the first century BC, Varro's project was to re-establish unity by bringing the Romans back to their roots. Cicero clearly states that Rome's alienation could be cured by finding out what Rome's identity really was. In the state of alienation, this identity is only visible in the outward appearances of statues, temples, and so on. In fact, it was almost lost. Cicero himself, a companion of Varro, did have more reservations towards the trend of strengthening traditional public religion,

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<sup>23</sup> Rejection of the cult of the Emperor was one reason why Christianity was declared an illegal religion, *religio illicita*.

<sup>24</sup> *City of God*, 6.2 (translation by Henry Bettenson, in Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 229). The quotation is from Cicero's *Academia* (1.3.9.) and continues as follows: “It was you who revealed to us the age of our country, the sequence of events, the laws of religious ceremonies and of the priesthoods, the traditional costumes of private and public life, the position of geographical areas and of particular places, and the terminology of all matters human and divine, with their various kinds, and functions, and causes.”

<sup>25</sup> Nancy discusses this theme in *La communauté désœuvrée*, Christian Bourgeois, Paris 1983. See also R. Bernasconi, ‘On deconstructing nostalgia for community within the West: the debate between Nancy and Blanchot’, in *Research in Phenomenology*, 23(1993), pp. 3-21. Nancy is exploring a form of community not closing itself by a compulsory reference to an original identity, which should be re-established. He longs for a community remaining open to (new) meaning. In this light, Augustine's (Christian) criticism of the Roman political-theological project gains interest.

especially by Julius Caesar.<sup>26</sup> Later on, he would write a sharp criticism of divination. Although he must have read the books of Varro, he never made use of them. This fact points to an important development within the Roman intellectual and political elite, which did not escape the attention of Augustine.

Secondly, we read in this quotation a key metaphor of Augustine: living as a stranger in this world.<sup>27</sup> Being a stranger in one's own city is having become a positivist sociologist of religion, observing data without really understanding what is inside of it, without the competence to make sense of it. He sees statues, temples and processions, he observes what people say and do, but he cannot figure out what it means. The meaning has been lost, until Varro wrote his book and gave meaning to all the aspects of Roman religion, of which only the outer appearance had remained. The meaning made these things and facts to *res mixtae* again, things belonging to this world and to the divine world at the same time. As we shall see, Augustine's criticism aims at showing that this meaning is one big lie, and that Varro knew it.

Here comes into play the distinction between three kinds of theology, found by Augustine in the work of Varro. According to this doctrine (or rather: "intellectual model"<sup>28</sup>) there are three kinds of theology: mythical theology (produced by the poets), natural theology (produced by philosophers) and political theology (produced by lawgivers). These theologies have their place in three locations: the theatre, the city and nature. The divine appears differently in the theatre (in imagination), in the city (in politics), and in the minds of those who search for the true nature of the gods (in reason). In book 4, chapter 27, Augustine also informs us that the same distinction is used by Scaevola, a high priest in Rome who lived a little earlier than Varro. In the quotation I used as a motto, Gibbon is referring to the same distinction.<sup>29</sup>

Gibbon is not the only one in the eighteenth century to contrast the religious tolerance in Rome with the doctrinal intolerance of Christianity. Rome is used

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<sup>26</sup> Arnaldo Momigliano, 'The Theological Efforts of the Roman Upper Classes in the First Century BC', in Clifford Ando, Clifford Ando (ed.), *Roman Religion*, Edinburg University Press, Edinburg 2003, pp. 147-163; originally in *Classical Philology*, 79(1984)3, pp. 199-211.

<sup>27</sup> Literally a pilgrim: for example, Abel is called "a citizen of the Eternal City, on pilgrimage in this world" (*City of God*, o.c., 15.5, p. 600), but this obtains for all men: "so long as he is in this mortal body, he is a pilgrim in a foreign land, away from God" (*City of God*, o.c., 19.14, p. 873).

<sup>28</sup> G. Lieberg, 'The theologia tripartita as an intellectual model in antiquity', in *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* (Monograph Series No. 4: Edgar C. Polomé, ed., Essays In Memory of Karl Kerényi), 1984, pp. 91-115.

<sup>29</sup> The distinction seems to be a common place in the eighteenth century. The source is Augustine. I did not find any earlier references. My colleague, Machiel Karskens, drew my attention to *La scienza nuovo* (third edition, 1744) in which Giambattista Vico mentions the Theologia Tripartita.

as a polemical counterexample, a point to which I shall return. Recent research has made more clear what Varro's project means. The Romans were anxious to stick to the forms of public life, especially religious rituals: the right way to honour the gods.<sup>30</sup> It was of great importance, therefore, to know exactly what the formal requirements were. Much of it has been lost; or was corrupted. Varro contributed to a *restoration* of Roman religion. The political inevitability for this was clear: Rome's imperial policy needed instruments for integration of its occupied territories and its people.<sup>31</sup> Religious politics was one of these instruments. Foreign gods and rituals had to be respected and integrated, but Rome's religious identity also had to be preserved.

For Varro, the relation to the gods was a human affair. In fact, the main point of the distinction of three kinds of theology was the reference to three human sources of our knowledge about the gods: poets, philosophers and magistrates. They all use a different language, a different practice to honour the gods, and a different view of what the gods are and do. For Varro, there was only the *pragmatic* question of how to deal with these differences. At the bottom line, therefore, we find a genuine sceptical attitude, preventing fanaticism in both directions – in denying or in affirming the existence of the gods. The gods were there, in human society. And that is all there is.

Although Augustine cannot be said to be a fanatic, he had serious trouble with this sceptical position. Here is a long quotation, which shows what he makes of Varro's project:

“So let our friends go and try (and good luck to them!) to use all their subtlety to make a distinction between ‘civil’ and ‘fabulous’ theology, between the city and the theatre, the temple and the stage, priestly ceremonies and poets’ verses – a supposed distinction between decency and obscenity, truth and falsehood, solemnity and frivolity, the serious and the farcical, between what is to be desired and what is to be rejected. We understand their motives. They know that the theology of the theatre and of fable depends on their ‘civil’ theology, which is reflected in the verses of the poets as in a mirror. They have not the courage to condemn ‘civil’ theology, but they give a detailed exposition of it, and then criticize its reflection in terms of reprobation. The purpose of this is that those who perceive their intention may also repudiate the original, of which this is a reflection. As for the gods, they look at themselves in the same mirror, and are so enamoured of what they see, that they can be more clearly recognized, in both reflection and original, for who they are and what

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<sup>30</sup> Cardauns writes in his comment that Varro's intention was to write a practical guide to Roman religion: “Seine Absicht ist also, ein praktisches Handbuch der römischen Religion zu liefern, das jeder Römer benutzen kann” (o.c., p. 245).

<sup>31</sup> John Scheid, ‘Cults, Myths, and Politics at the Beginning of the Empire’, in Clifford Ando, o.c., pp. 117-138; originally in F. Graf (ed.), *Mythos in mythenloser Gesellschaft: Das Paradigma Roms*, Teubner, Stuttgart 1993, pp. 109-127.

they are. [...] For the present, I have followed the distinctions made by Varro, and I believe that I have sufficiently shown that both the theology of the city and the theology of the theatre belong to one division, namely, 'civil' theology. Hence, since they are both alike in their indecency, their absurdity, their unworthiness, their falsity, heaven forbid that any man of genuine religion should hope for life eternal from either of them."<sup>32</sup>

The point Augustine wants to make is that Varro's reconstruction of Roman religion is mainly concerned with the work of the poets – that is, stories about the gods. This mythical theology is the context of public religion, of the state cult, of political theology. Although Varro as a philosopher did not believe in these stories, he nevertheless was reluctant to show his unbelief, because he was afraid to reject public religion openly. According to Augustine, Varro was a hypocrite, or at least, he was not frank.<sup>33</sup> He refused *parrhèsia*. Augustine himself, while using the material produced by Varro, was not afraid to tell the truth in public. In short, his point of view is that Roman religion is totally man made, a product of human fantasy, and therefore merely lies. Political theology, based on these lies, cannot be anything else than theatre. This is proof that the Romans did not honour their gods, but defiled them. Implicitly, Varro gives an affirmation of this thesis by suggesting that the truth can only be found in natural theology, a philosophical treatment of the gods. Natural theology claims that the gods are only allegorical figures, referring to natural phenomena. Augustine fully agrees with this.

#### 4. Augustine's religious criticism

Augustine's *City of God* presents a famous, influential and systematic doctrine of Christianity's attitude towards politics, known as the doctrine of the Two Cities, the secular city and the heavenly city. The book was written in the beginning of the fifth century. Christianity already had been elevated to the status of official religion of the Roman Empire, although there still was considerable opposition within the elites. Many Roman citizens wanted to return to the ancient, polytheistic tradition. When Rome was taken by 'Christian barbarians' (the Visigoths) in 410, the opposition seized the opportunity to attack Christianity. In his book, on which he worked for about twenty years, Augustine gives an apology of Christianity and at the same time attacks Roman

<sup>32</sup> *City of God*, 6.9, *o.c.*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>33</sup> *City of God*, 6.10 (*o.c.*, p. 248): "Varro lacked the frankness and courage to criticize the theology of the city with the same freedom he showed towards the theology of the theatre, which resembled it so closely."

religion. In this attack, we find important principles for a kind of religious criticism, re-emerging in modern critiques of religion. This, I think, is the true significance of this work. We are witnessing the “autodépassement” of Christianity at work. What Augustine wrote in the early fifth century was not very different from what, for example, Thomas Hobbes wrote about ancient religion in chapter 12 of the *Leviathan*, published in 1651. David Hume in his natural history of religion stays close to the basic scheme of Augustine’s religious criticism, despite his disapproval of the zealous attack on Varro.<sup>34</sup> Modern religious criticism merely has to shift the Christian critique of pagan religion to Christianity itself. So, one interesting question is how Augustine could develop a radical critique of religion without being forced to reject Christianity too, and how it was possible that modern thinkers could develop a general critique of religion, while accepting the results and the principles of *Christian* criticism. It seems that Christianity could become the religion for departing from religion, because it is based on an absolute distinction between true and false religion, in which truth was critical as such and, ultimately, self-critical.

In the first ten chapters of *The city of God*, Augustine argues that the Roman gods did not give the people what they want – to oversimplify a bit. For Augustine, the real question is whether the honour shown to the Roman gods in the cults, prayers and ceremonies had any effect, either concerning things important in this life or concerning the attainment of eternal life. This question is quite utilitarian. It remains completely within the magical realm of *do ut des*, while neglecting, as I will show later, the element of Roman *pietas*. According to Augustine, the Roman gods were ineffective. There was not even a god for attaining eternal life! Augustine seems to suggest that believing in the true God (the God of the Christians), is more effective. In fact, the Christian god is the only one guaranteeing access to his kingdom, eternal life, of course only for those who truly believe in this god.

From a modern perspective, we could neglect this kind of criticism, being merely Christian propaganda or an early example of the language common to commercials. In this criticism, we also can see a first step in the process of disenchantment of the world. Augustine shows evidence of a functionalist approach to religion. Does it help anyone? Do we need it? The magical

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<sup>34</sup> *The Natural History of Religion* (1757), in *The Natural History of Religion, and Dialogues concerning Natural religion*, edited by A. Wayne Colver, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1976, p. 72: “The learned, philosophical *Varro*, discoursing of religion, pretends not to deliver any thing beyond probabilities and appearances: Such was his good sense and moderation! But the passionate, the zealous *Augustin*, insults the noble *Roman* on his skepticism and reserve, and professes the most thorough belief and assurance.” (The reference to *City of God* given here is wrong; it should be VII, 17, not III, 17.)

atmosphere of the cult and the prayer is replaced by the language of 'science' and 'technique'. Does any particular action have the intended effect? Is it a means to a specific end? Augustine's style shows clear signs of mockery, which will become a hallmark of modern religious criticism.<sup>35</sup> I am not sure whether Augustine really believed in the efficacy of praying to the true god. In that case, he would merely shift from an ineffective to an alleged effective magical worldview. But there is more.

The real issue is not about the effectiveness of religious practices, but about the very concept of the divine. For Augustine, God is separated from this world, and so is his kingdom, his *civitas*. As far as Christians subject themselves to this transcendent God, and become citizens of the city of God, they too become separated from this world. The metaphor used by Augustine, as I said before, is that Christians are strangers in this world, far away from home but longing to get home. In this world, however, for the time being, they must adjust themselves to the way things are. They may even, enlightened by the image of a perfect city, improve social and political order. Christians are allowed or even encouraged to invest in this world, but they may never devote themselves to this world, or to the cities in this world. A civil religion is *a sign of false religion*. (Augustine never said it was impossible.)

The Romans, on the contrary, whether they were true believers or whether they cynically accepted religion as an instrument to safeguard the state, devoted themselves to the city, to this world. They had no idea of transcendence, except maybe for some philosophers who seem to have an inkling of 'the truth'. The Romans were at home in this world and this, exactly, is their error. They err without knowing the way home.

A stranger can look at the world from a distance, giving an objective description of the world, while separating his own thoughts from this description. The stranger becomes a kind of *positivist*. Maybe we should say that positivism could only emerge in a culture in which the subject separates itself from the outside world, as if he had nothing to do with it. Without doubt, when reading

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<sup>35</sup> Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (originally in German, 1930), University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997, pp. 145-146: "This critique has a prospect of success, not by direct argumentation, but only by virtue of the mockery that lends spice to the arguments, and lodges them firmly in the hearer's mind. Reason must turn into 'esprit' if reason is to experience her more than royal freedom, her unshakable sovereignty, and to realize it in action. Through laughter and mockery, reason overleaps the barriers that she was not able to overcome when she proceeded pace by pace in formal argumentation. But all the self-consciousness of the Enlightenment cannot conceal the fact that this critique, peculiar to the Enlightenment – historically effective as it was – does not reach the core of revealed religion, but is only a critique of certain consequences and is therefore questionable."

Augustine, we are still far away from positivism and its religious criticism. As a stranger, his mind is filled with images of another world that still interferes with his description of this world. In the final analysis, Augustine does not escape the enchanted world of the ancients, but he gives arguments that could be used for such an escape.

Augustine's positivism, his religious criticism, and his attempt to transcend the enchanted world of the ancients become apparent in his reception of Varro. He clearly rejects the attempt to restore the religion of the ancestors as a lie. In fact, he rejects the possibility of the establishment of a perfect *civitas*, an eternal empire, in this world. This is the critical element inherent in the idea of the openness of a community. The nostalgia is reinstated as the eternal city appearing at the end of times. Nevertheless, this 'autodépassement' of de *civitas* in the *civitas Dei*<sup>36</sup> seems to be blind to the characteristic *openness* of the Roman civilisation itself, which also could serve as a way to prevent communal closure.

## 5. The meaning of the Theologia Tripertita (evaluation)

Although the Romans were more interested in religious practice than in some form of orthodoxy, there was a real intellectual interest in theology<sup>37</sup>, which appeared already in Plato's work. The three modes of worship, of which Gibbon has given a caricature, or the partition in three kinds of theology, show that the Romans had a differentiated attitude towards religion. They accepted the need for stories about the Gods. They thought it necessary to stick to the cults, but for the (intellectual) elite there was room to speculate freely about the nature of the Gods (cf. Cicero). The only restriction was that these speculations should be kept indoors in order not to disturb public religion. Augustine, of course, knew precisely this 'discretion of the unbelievers'. However, whereas the intellectual elite of Rome thought this discretion is a virtue and a duty, Christianity preferred a public truth.<sup>38</sup> Christianity replaced this differentiated

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<sup>36</sup> Again, Nancy, o.c., p. 212: "L'identité chrétienne est donc d'entrée de jeu une constitution par autodépassement: la Loi ancienne dans la Loi nouvelle, le *logos* dans le Verbe, la *civitas* dans la *civitas Dei*, etc."

<sup>37</sup> For an overview of Roman theology in this period, see Elizabeth Rawson, *Intellectual Life in the Late Roman Republic*, Duckworth, London 1985, pp. 298ff.

<sup>38</sup> *City of God*, o.c., 6.5, p. 235: "What sensitive ears ordinary people have, including the Roman people, in matters of religion! They cannot tolerate the discussions of philosophers about the immortal gods. Yet they not merely tolerate, they listen with pleasure to fictions, sung by poets and acted by players, which offend against the dignity and the nature of the gods [...]." One cannot overhear Plato's criticism of mythical theology. The alternative to this religious tolerance of the people is the dictatorship of the truth (or those who know the truth).

theology by only one theology, based on revelation, claiming truth for all (*vera religio*). Augustine seems to reject the difference between esoteric and exoteric belief, elite and population. Above all, he rejects a political theology, especially when connected to mythical theology. Modernity in its confrontation with Christian theology could only reject theology as a whole, because this was already identified with revelation. But the problem with differentiated theology was that the solution never disappeared, of course. The problem the Romans solved was raised again (without using the terms of the Romans). Spinoza wants to make natural theology (the speculations of the intellectual elite) public.<sup>39</sup> This is the start of the Enlightenment. But the spread of science among the population never succeeded. Should we return to the Roman solution? What is wiser, distribution of the truth for all, or the virtue of discretion? To some extent, Augustine is right when pointing to the doctrine of the *Theologia Tripertita* as a sign of embarrassment among the Roman intellectual elite. Further, Augustine could build on a stream of philosophical religious criticism, which was already developed among the intellectuals in ancient Greek and Roman society. This criticism sought to differentiate between true religion and superstition. Superstition refers to all forms of religion that are not honourable – for the gods, and for men.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, Augustine was a little prejudiced. For him, this world is not the real world. This life is only a passing life. The real thing is somewhere else. Although this makes possible a criticism of this world, of society as it is, of the violent and ugly faces of the Roman Empire<sup>41</sup>, it also makes it difficult to understand and appreciate a Roman citizen. More importantly, it makes it difficult to assess the general meaning of the doctrine of the three theologies. Maybe, in the Roman context, the doctrine was not free of cynicism, but I will argue that its general meaning could transcend cynicism, exactly in the way Hume and Gibbon proposed.

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<sup>39</sup> In his *Theological-political treatise* (1670), he pleads for the *libertas philosophandi*, including the right of philosophers to criticize superstitious beliefs and official religion. Now, Augustine is turned against himself.

<sup>40</sup> Dale Martin, *Inventing Superstition. From the Hippocratics to the Christians*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) and London 2004. The main point Martin makes, apart from his insistence on the fact that, in contrast to modern religious criticism, the ancient thinkers were not rejecting superstition because it was belief in the supernatural, is the shift to a parallel between ontological and ethical hierarchy, power and morals. The most powerful being must also represent the highest good. This idea reappears in the Christian philosophy that God is good, and therefore his Creation must be good.

<sup>41</sup> Christianity therefore is *resistance* against the closures made up by state or church, as Nancy points out.

Augustine did not appraise the reasons why Roman intellectuals made this differentiation between kinds of theology; he used this doctrine as an authoritative argument for his claim that Roman religion should be rejected. In this way, he thought he could convince his opponents in the Roman elite by showing that, for centuries, Roman intellectuals had been of the same opinion as Augustine. Roman intellectuals, however, were not concerned with eternal life, in a life hereafter. They were concerned with the eternity of the Roman Empire, an eternal *pax Romana*. My point is that Augustine, probably with full consciousness of what he was doing, neglected (1) the political reasoning of the Roman elite, (2) their affinity with public theatre, *decorum*, and social formalism, and (3) the sceptical tendency of natural theology or philosophy. In short, the Roman elite were not interested in a public role for the truth. For them, the quest for truth was part of private, personal development.

## 6. The (in)discretion of unbelievers – deconstruction of Christianity revisited

In our world, divided in a powerful secular minority and a religious majority<sup>42</sup>, a basic question is what should be the attitude of the *unbeliever*, confronted as he is with so many people who are deeply convinced of the existence of things, of which he is convinced that they are merely the product of imagination. This problem was posed to many elites: the Roman elite, the Christian elite, and the elites of modern society as well. The question is how to deal with the truth they represented? How to deal with the errors of the masses? What Christianity and Modernity have in common is the propensity, to say the least, of living in the truth instead of enjoying the myths of society. Of course, in the name of the truth, one can reject the rule of a monomythical identity, but this is also possible by a pragmatic acceptance of a plurality of myths.<sup>43</sup>

Monotheism, on the other hand, although it distanced itself from mythical theology, went in another direction. Like Plato before him, who set the paradigm<sup>44</sup>, Augustine starts from an idea of one true God, or a truth about the

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<sup>42</sup> P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (etc.) 2004.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Odo Marquard with his praise of polytheism: *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen*, Reclam, Stuttgart 1981.

<sup>44</sup> Plato, *Politeia*, 376c-383c (*Republic*, in: *Complete Works*, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1977, pp. 1014-1022.). In this text, the concept of theology appears for the first time in history (as far as we know). Plato develops new kinds of theology, more rational and functional than the traditional myths.

real nature of God. Augustine, apart from the doubts he has himself, is not a sceptic, like many Roman authors on the subject of the gods. Cicero confines himself to an exposition of different schools of philosophers, holding different ideas about the gods.<sup>45</sup> Cicero does not openly deny the existence of the gods. This point was made, some centuries ago, by David Hume. Secondly, religious criticism emerges among the intellectuals of ancient Greece<sup>46</sup>, but it became an art and developed in a different direction within *monotheistic* religions. Religion, reduced to one truth, cannot but reject everything that is false in other religions. The sceptical point of view, which accepts that talking about gods only refers to people's opinions about things, and that the stories about the gods are made by poets, philosophers and magistrates, is taken up by Augustine as proof of their falsehood. The point is that Augustine's emphasis on the opposition between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, the acceptance or rejection of the one true God, leads him to underestimate the *practical* or *pragmatic* orientation of the Roman intellectuals. Thirdly, Augustine is an unbeliever in the world of Roman religion, as most of the Roman intellectuals were. But Augustine could not accept that something that is false still plays a role in public life. The truth, as soon as we have found it, should be public. We should live in the truth, and destroy lies. False religion should be criticized and rejected. Diffidence, circumspection, discretion are not the virtues Augustine is praising here. He proceeds from his unbelief in the Roman gods to the exclamation that the Romans are liars.

All this is deeply rooted in Christianity as an episode in 'a political history of religion' (Marcel Gauchet). Politically speaking, the historical event of Christianity – i.e. the movement based on the autopoietical organization of the myth of Jesus Christ as historical intervention of God of a certain kind – means three things: (1) the rejection of messianic or apocalyptic violence, designed to overthrow an oppressive regime (Christians did not participate in the Jewish rebellion against the Roman Empire, which resulted in the destruction by the Roman army of Jerusalem in 70 AC); (2) the rejection of the *theologia civilis* or state cult (according to Christians religion should not be a part of political order); (3) the rejection of a religion identifying itself as withdrawal from the world, as pure alien to this world, and especially as divine knowledge of salvation (Gnosis).

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<sup>45</sup> *De natura deorum*. Later on, in his book on divination, Cicero will become more critical about aspects of the Roman religion.

<sup>46</sup> Religious criticism starts as an internal, philosophical and moral criticism of traditional religion, that is: an internal differentiation. Cf. Dale B. Martin, o.c.

This threefold rejection (including, of course, the ambivalence present in any rejection) was developed in the first centuries of the history of Christianity and accomplished by the construction and establishment of a consistent theology, constituting Christianity's *orthodoxy* – that is, the right opinion. Augustine, of course, can be seen as one of the major authors of this orthodoxy. Christianity as our horizon is not merely positive, but includes this negativity. Christianity is not only what it affirms, but also what it rejects. Christianity disconnected our western culture from archaic and traditional religions, although it did not succeed in this completely. Therefore, it would be better to say, that it is the *battle* of Christianity against its opponents (or the other way around) which made our culture what it is now. In this sense, a 'deconstruction of Christianity' has to be carried out in a more broadly-based context. It is not confined to the »juif-grec«. More references are needed.

If the doctrine of the three kinds of theology was an "intellectual model" in the Roman world, reflecting a differentiation in theology, one could ask what position a Christian theology could have in this model. Can this model be adjusted to the *fact* of Christianity, as it emerged within the Roman world? On the one hand, we could simply argue that Christianity puts forward a new source: the witnesses who talk about Jesus Christ, who himself revealed a divine message. Then we would have a further differentiation of theology: mythical, political, natural and 'revelatory' theology. The question would be how these kinds of theology should be related. Christianity could have been integrated in the Roman religious world. On the other hand, we could argue, Christianity contains a much stronger claim. Its theology is the articulation of a revealed truth, of which the acceptance entails a complete rejection of the previous theologies. Christian theology is about unification, not about differentiation. Christian theology has a tendency towards exclusion and suppression, maybe even *because* of its radical turn to an open ending.

If we look at it from the perspective of political philosophy, the attempt of Christianity to live in this world without being of this world, without a spiritual investment in this world, constitutes its significance as political revolution. The transition from *civitas* to *civitas Dei* consists of a spiritualization of political order (i.e. the Roman political order). The political significance of spiritualization is depoliticization. Christianity, in its anti-Roman effect, deals with the world and with human beings in view of eternal salvation. It leaves politics to those wicked people who are prepared to invest in this world. Of course, there is *Roman* Christianity, more or less connected to political power,

the long history of the bond between throne and altar. Nancy's attachment to Christianity, however, seems to be completely in line with this anti-Roman tendency. This affects his notion of community.

## 7. Conclusion: another communal openness?

We may discern several major themes in the confrontation between the Christian and Roman worldviews as exemplified by Augustine and Varro. In all these themes, we must be aware of the asymmetrical nature of the opposition. A general feature of criticism may be that the terms by which one position rejects the other have a quite different meaning for the other position. The criticism then never affects the criticized object completely.<sup>47</sup> Of course, there is no space to explore this problem. So, in concluding, I will just comment on each of these themes.

An interesting point is that the *text of Varro* has become invisible (and therefore unreadable). It is lost, except for the quotations in the books of those who criticized its content. Nevertheless, this text may change its nature by becoming a *Fremdkörper*, a Roman text in a Christian text, distorted but also capable of distortion. It is this incorporation that can be undone, or that even can make itself undone, as happened in the eighteenth century when Varro was turned against Augustine (Montesquieu, Hume, Gibbon and in a more indirect way Rousseau).

Augustine doubles the invisibility of Varro by a problematic reconstruction of what Varro really meant. Of course, we do not have the texts to falsify this claim. The main idea is that Varro was a philosopher who did not believe the stories about the gods, told by the poets and believed by the people. However, he accepted the civil theology of Rome, connected to these stories. Augustine criticizes Varro for not being sincere: he should have said openly what he thought to be true and rejected publicly what was false. Augustine recognized in Varro's philosophy or natural theology (affiliated with the stoic doctrine) much that was comparable to Christian thought. Of course, this criticism was directed to the Roman elite, who did not believe in public religion either, but thought a civil theology was necessary for the state. The ideas of the philosophers were not very useful in this respect. Augustine defends that public belief should be truthful. Christianity should be the standard.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, o.c.

The distortion betrays itself as soon as the texts themselves show the possibility of another Varro. The reconstruction of the text of the *Antiquitates* from its fragments (accomplished by Cardauns) and other sources that tell us about the ideas of the Roman elite in the first century BC reveal what is left out by Augustine. In fact, the text of Augustine that incorporates the texts of Varro is the sign of a difference, a confrontation, or even a real clash of civilizations.

Rather than between polytheism versus monotheism, I think the confrontation is between orthopraxy and orthodoxy, social practice versus (revealed or philosophical) truth. For the Roman position, the falsity attached to its religion is not denied (at least, not by Varro), but is simply less important because something else is of more importance. This is the very attitude that, in the eyes of Augustine, causes neglect of the revealed truth.

For the Romans, the gods are part of society (one should communicate with the gods as with family, citizens and other human beings in the world). For the Christians, God is transcendent (more or less: the idea is not developed consistently).

Although Varro, as most of the intellectuals in the Roman elite, was not very enthusiastic about the public theatre, his basic feeling about public life is theatrical. Augustine, for his part, evaluated this Roman inclination to play-acting (doing ‘as if’) as insincere and untrue. For the Romans, however, this theatre was part of their piety and public dignity. Christianity’s abhorrence of theatre entails disenchantment of politics and spiritualization of the real state. Here, I think, lies an important element of the “autodépassement” inherent to Christianity, in this case the transformation of the *civitas* into *civitas Dei*. The state or empire is no longer what has to be secured here and now, but is always still to come.

The basic clash is between spiritual investment in this world (as it is) versus rejection of this spiritual investment. Christianity does not believe in the perfection of this world. Christians remain strangers in this world (and citizens of another world). Romans accepted a civil religion, mainly for political purposes. Augustine’s criticism, which may be the main idea of Christianity’s attitude towards politics, is directed at the heart of Roman *Realpolitik*. Justice should replace a clever ruling of the people. The reverse side is that Christianity refuses political responsibility.

What can we learn from this example with regard to a deconstruction of Christianity? There is much to say here, but I confine myself to one point. The West is not identical to Christianity, but to an ongoing confrontation of ways of life

in which Christianity is only one possible option, always challenged. In a deconstruction of Christianity, we must be aware that we also take into account the distortions in Christian texts of this clash itself. In Nancy's approach, there seems to be a tendency towards such a differentiated analysis. The audience he speaks to seems to have made him neglect this other reference and its simplifications.

To finish, let me refer to two topical themes that can be associated with the confrontation between Varro and Augustine, Roman political-theological culture and Christianity.

One might be tempted to think that, at least after Christianity, the Christian religious criticism preserves its effects: the divine has become transcendent. However, in modern political culture, we still relate to that which founds our political order (principles, values, moral constitution). In this sense, the gods are still part of social life. Political cult could be enacted as an expression of piety, loyalty to the basic principles of our political order.

Christianity has left its mark on western Enlightenment: the revealed truth should be public. Lies should be banned from public life. Criticism of false beliefs should be open. Today, we encounter a secularist radicalism that claims the right to express its religious criticism in public, even by means of mockery and overt contempt. In this respect, the Roman attitude towards people's beliefs, discretion of the unbelievers, present in Varro's differentiation of kinds of theology, might still be of importance.

It seems to me that Nancy is inclined to raise the question of our Christian inheritance and neglect the reference to Rome also because his approach to society and community, the coming together of people, is *not political, but moral*. Nancy has no theory of institutions and its rituals. For him, being together only relates to meaning (*sens*), not to practice. The Roman element in the western world, on the contrary, stresses that our being together is represented by political institutions. This holds us together, guarantees our freedom, at least as long as we respect these institutions (the Roman *pietas*). Does it really matter, whether these institutions represent mere fictions that remain open for everyone to give his own interpretation? It is only in a specific context in which theology and truth are identified, that a civil religion could develop into a totalitarian project, forcing society into one sense. Because a specific kind of Christianity has lost the meaning of theology as *human* way of dealing with the gods, it has also forgotten about its pragmatic nature. Nancy cannot differentiate between state cult as theatre and totalitarian forms of state cult. Theatre always leaves room for interpretation, because the meaning or the truth of the play is not the important thing. The important thing is that we *act*

in the right way. Why should civil religion in this sense be impossible? Why should we resist it?

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